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ABSTRACT

This life history explored the history and evolution of one urban high school English teacher's beliefs about literacy and how those beliefs shaped her teaching practice. Data collection included classroom observations; formal interviews with the teacher (Anna); individual conversations with Anna and her friends, colleagues, and family; other interactions conducted over time; academic papers on literacy and teaching Anna had written for college courses; and professional documents. The life history shows how Anna's beliefs fell into two broad categories. First, there were temporary beliefs that arose primarily through her childhood experiences in school and university experiences as a preservice teacher. These beliefs proved dysfunctional when she tried to put them into practice, so she abandoned them. Second, there were long-standing beliefs that were generally rooted in her personal life experiences which transcended school. These beliefs were the very essence of who she was as a person and were immutable to change. Over time, her teaching practices changed, evolving from teacher-controlled to learner-centered. Results illustrate the tremendous complexity and contextualized nature of teacher thinking, emphasizing that being a teacher involves not only mastering a set of skills, but also developing an inner awareness. (Contains 65 references.) (SM)

THE STORY OF "ANNA:"
A LIFE HISTORY STUDY OF THE LITERACY BELIEFS AND TEACHING
PRACTICES OF AN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHER*

by

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THE STORY OF "ANNA:" A LIFE HISTORY STUDY OF THE LITERACY BELIEFS AND TEACHING PRACTICES OF AN URBAN HIGH SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHER

During the past fifteen years, educational researchers have become increasingly interested in understanding the lives of teachers (e.g., Ball & Goodson, 1985; Goodson, 1992; Witherell & Noddings, 1991)—including the ways they think about their subject matter (Stodolsky, 1988) and curriculum in general (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). Important in this work is an emphasis on understanding teachers' thinking from *their* perspective—from the perspective of an *insider* looking around, and not from that of an *outsider* looking in. Such an emphasis has resulted in an increase in the use of life history and narrative approaches in studies of teacher thinking and teacher socialization (see, e.g., Carter, 1993; Casey, 1995; Clandinin & Connelly, 1996; Cole & Knowles, 2000, in press; Elbaz, 1991; Goodson, 1992).

Consistent with this kind of research, for five years (1992-1997), I was involved in a collaborative research relationship with an experienced high school English teacher named "Anna Henson" (a pseudonym). Utilizing a life history approach, I explored the history and evolution of Anna's beliefs about literacy, and how these beliefs had shaped her teaching practices throughout her career.

Background of the Study

I first met Anna in the summer of 1990 when we were both enrolled in a graduate course at The University of Michigan. At that time, Anna was a part-time doctoral student as well as a full-time teacher at "Windrow High School" (a pseudonym) in urban Detroit. Windrow was a comprehensive high school with an enrollment of approximately 2400 students, 99.5% of whom were African-American.

With twenty-five years as a classroom teacher, Anna always exuded a quiet confidence in her teaching—and whenever she talked about her classroom, I never sensed any of the underlying dissatisfactions and frustrations that I had sometimes experienced when I was a public school teacher. As I got to know Anna, I gradually found myself wondering how she had gotten to this point in her career. What were her beliefs about literacy? What did she do in her classroom? To what extent were her beliefs and practices related? How had this relationship been mediated by the contexts that she had experienced throughout her career? What kinds of pedagogical decisions had she made in response to such contexts? These are some of the questions that drove my study.

Methods

Ever since researchers in the field of reading first became interested in exploring the connection between teachers' beliefs and practices in the late 1970s and early 1980s (e.g., Barr & Duffy, 1978; Buike & Duffy, 1979; DeFord, 1985; Duffy, 1981; Hoffman & Kugle, 1982), survey-type instruments have been a common way to study teacher thinking. In fact, one of the more popular instruments, DeFord's (1985) "Theoretical Orientation to Reading Profile" (TORP), is still widely used by researchers who wish to characterize teachers' beliefs about reading (e.g., Evans, 1995; Ketner, Smith, & Parness, 1997; Morison et al., 1997; Sacks & Mergendoller, 1997). I believe there are at least two significant shortcomings in using these kinds of instruments.

First, survey instruments tend to mute the voices of teachers by separating their beliefs from their lived experiences. Beliefs do not exist in a vacuum. They are formulated and are held by particular people in particular contexts—people who live and breathe, and have personal histories and future aspirations. All teachers possess life stories in which their thoughts and actions are situated, yet survey instruments such as DeFord's (1985) regularly filter out this rich and important

context, leaving only the disembodied responses to a series of propositional statements.

Second, survey studies tend to encourage top-down models of change—offering policy prescriptions that may unwittingly undermine teacher agency and erode their sense of professionalism. Because survey studies often deal with sizable populations and are more concerned with overarching trends than with individual cases, they are typically used to produce formally-generalizable knowledge that is forcefully applied to other teachers in other situations. This kind of “professional development” too often takes the form of top-down administrative mandates which view teachers as subservient technicians hired primarily to implement beaurocratically-sanctioned policies and procedures.

My study with Anna represents an alternative approach to studying teacher thinking. Instead of relying upon surveys and questionnaires, I utilized a series of personal observations, one-on-one conversations, and other interactions with a single teacher conducted over an extended period of time. Characterized by an ethic of caring and sensitivity to the lives of teachers, my research is consistent with the narrative work done by Clandinin and Connelly (1986, 1987), Connelly & Clandinin (1988, 1990), Elbaz (1983), Schubert and Ayers (1992), and others.

Specifically, my study utilized life history and ethnographic methods (e.g., Denzin, 1989a, 1989b, 1997; Van Maanen, 1988, 1995; Van Manen, 1990; Wolcott, 1995). In order to learn about Anna’s beliefs, I conducted 10 formal interviews with Anna, plus dozens of informal conversations. In order to learn about her current teaching practices, I made more than 50 visits to her classroom in Detroit, assuming the role of a participant observer. In addition, under Anna’s direction, I spoke with many of her friends, relatives, colleagues, and past and present students—all of whom were familiar, to varying degrees, with her teaching practices and her thinking about literacy. Another source of information included a collection of 19

academic papers that she had written for college courses throughout her career, in which she regularly discussed issues related to literacy and teaching. Finally, she provided me with copies of various professional documents—including newspaper clippings, past and present evaluations of her teaching conducted by various school administrators, and other professional documents. Taken together, all of this information enabled me to construct an in-depth narrative portrait of Anna's life as a teacher, with a particular focus on the evolution of her beliefs and practices.

Anna's Life History

Reading and writing always played an important role in Anna's life. Growing up in a small community in rural Michigan, she was surrounded by adults who valued literacy. "I learned to write before I even went to school," she said.

I remember writing, sitting alongside my father when he was in graduate school and I was in kindergarten and modeling with nonsense words, copying things. And there would be quiet times in the evening where I would sit with a book or magazine at three and four before I could read, just to be with the adults.

Anna described her household as being fairly typical of white middle class America in the post-World War II era. It was a close-knit family with four children—three boys and one girl. Both of her parents came from immigrant families, and her grandparents lived next door. The only thing that she considered to be unusual was the fact that her mother's parents could not read or write. "School wasn't any part of their experience," she said.

They had left the Old Country—Poland and Russia—and come to this country and started to work at the Ford Motor Company. They got to be middle class people by virtue of work, not education.... They understood the value of education, but from a very different point of view than the people around me who took education for granted.

Anna fondly remembered the role that her mother played in helping her grandparents to communicate with their relatives still living in Europe.

(My mother) was always writing letters for them to the Old Country and reading the letters that came. She was bilingual. She could speak both English and Polish and some German, and she would translate the letters. Those would be events. We would sit around the table, and Grandma and Grandpa would come. We would picture the lives of these people we'd never met and probably never would.

Anna's early interest in reading and writing was reinforced by her school experiences. "In grade school, I had exceptional language arts teachers," she remembered. "As I look back now we did a lot of reading, and we were encouraged to read and write outside the class." Anna attended a small Catholic school that was run by four nuns, each of whom taught two classes with mixed grades. "Having two grades in one room," she explained, "you always knew what to anticipate for the next year because you saw exactly what was going to happen. And I was a kid who was a fast finisher, always eager to move on to the next reader." Indeed, Anna said that she always excelled in text-oriented activities.

We had classroom contests, out-of-school contests, all kinds of writing contests, and I was always encouraged to enter because I always did fairly well. It was something that I felt accomplished at and enjoyed doing.... I really saw it as a source of identity as a student.

Anna continued her interest in academic pursuits as a student at a small, private high school for girls—and later when she was in college. In describing her high school, she said:

It drew students from the metropolitan Detroit area. I lived about twenty miles from the school, so all the activities that I did were during school hours. We didn't have after-school activities. We didn't have sports teams, so it wasn't like a typical high school in that sense. There were boarders too. I wasn't a boarder, but there were residential students in the school.

Within this environment, Anna found it relatively easy to establish friendships with other students who shared her scholarly interests.

College

After graduating from high school in 1964, Anna enrolled at Michigan State University in East Lansing. There, she hoped to encounter a thriving community of

scholars—people with whom she could share and expand her intellectual interests. What she found, however, was very different. “I was surprised that students weren’t as serious-minded as I thought they were going to be,” she said.

I had anticipated college as being kind of like high school but just more intense. Yet when I got there, I found that I had to really seek out people who were interested in academics. That puzzled me. I was really disoriented for a while.

Anna gradually overcome this feeling of isolation and confusion by pursuing extracurricular activities that involved reading and writing. She served as an editor for a literary magazine; she attended poetry readings; and she actively sought out professors and other individuals who shared in her passion for the written word.

During this time, Anna’s career options wavered among several professions, including teaching and journalism. “I knew in elementary school that teaching was important to me,” she said.

But I also knew that writing was something I wanted to do. I had considered journalism but wasn’t sure that I liked that kind of writing. I didn’t like writing under pressure. Writing was always a leisure sort of activity for me. It was something I enjoyed doing slowly, deliberately. And having worked on school newspapers and such, I knew that journalism was a pressure situation. I didn’t like that kind of writing.

Anna ultimately decided to become a teacher, although she explained that her decision was motivated more by pragmatic concerns than by any special calling that she felt to the profession. “I think it was a question of wanting to support myself,” she said. “I wanted to be independent, so teaching was a practical move so I could be financially independent.”

After committing herself to this career choice, Anna decided that she wanted to do her student teaching in Detroit. “I knew I wanted to work in the city,” she explained. “I didn’t want small-town living.... I thought of the city as an important place where all the world’s work was done.” Anna was assigned to do her student teaching at Windrow High School (a pseudonym) in Detroit.

Windrow in the 1960s

Windrow was still relatively new in 1967 when Anna student-taught there. Built a decade earlier as a small neighborhood school with an initial enrollment of approximately 900 students, it had been expanded in the early 1960s to meet the needs of a growing community. "Windrow is now a small school," the 1961 yearbook stated. "It is a close school, a tight school." Continuing in language that evokes an idealized image of social harmony and blithe contentment, the yearbook said:

There is no prevailing division of classes, no extensive social discrimination.... There is freedom at Windrow, more 'subtle' liberty. Here, one usually finds escape from classroom restrictions at lunch or class exchange: for at Windrow there is no frantic hurry through the halls, no over-jammed lunchrooms inspiring disgust and indigestion. At best, we are a somewhat leisurely lot....

By 1967, however, Windrow had undergone a major building expansion, and the enrollment had almost tripled. With more than 3000 students and 130 teachers, it had become one of the largest high schools in the city, and was widely regarded as a model institution. The *Report of Findings and Recommendations* of the Detroit High School Study (High School Study Commission, 1967) called the building "an excellent example of a well-constructed school edifice" (p. 7). At that time, it served a predominantly white, middle class community with approximately three percent of the students being African-American. Sixty-eight percent of the 1967 graduates applied to college, up from 52% in 1960, and the report praised the faculty for their excellent work—especially in the areas of math, English, science, and music. In addition, race relations were reported to be excellent, with African-American students and members of ethnic minorities being well-integrated into the school community. Their achievement patterns, it stated, mirrored those of the larger student body.

A City in Turmoil

In many ways, the scenario at Windrow in the 1960s represented the calm before the storm. By 1967, some Detroit schools were already experiencing the racial tensions that had gripped the nation at large. In April, 1966, for instance, there was a massive student protest at Northern High School. More than 2300 students at this predominantly African-American school staged a walkout in protest of the principal's decision to ban the publication of an uncomplimentary editorial in the school newspaper. Written by a white honor student, the editorial maintained that students who graduated from Northern and other predominantly African-American schools in the Detroit system were not adequately prepared for college and the workplace. "We simply do not feel that such a drastic difference in classroom achievement, such as the one between Redford (a predominantly white school in Detroit) and Northern, should be allowed to exist," the editorial was quoted as saying (Mackey, 1966, p. 1A). "We don't believe that students should pass any class for any other reason than having completed the course satisfactorily" (pp. 1A, 4A). The editorial went on to suggest that a uniform test be administered to all prospective graduates of Detroit's high schools in order to ensure that they had met a minimum standard of academic achievement.

Shortly after the protest at Northern, which was viewed favorably in an editorial that appeared in the *Detroit Free Press* ("One Protest," 1966), the city newspaper published a scathing expose on the poor conditions in other Detroit public schools. Sending one of its reporters into a predominantly African-American junior high school under the guise of being a substitute teacher, the *Free Press* printed a four-part story that told of crumbling buildings, shortages of books, and teacher indifference (Treloar, 1966a, 1966b, 1966c, 1966d). In describing the classroom to which he was assigned, the reporter wrote:

There was a wad of gum stuck on the blackboard. In one corner, paint flaked off the ceiling. Later, students would sit very still and watch the pieces drift down and land on their shoulders and in their hair, artificial dandruff.

I don't know how old the desks were, but there must have been two generations of initials etched into the unvarnished tops. Each desk had a hole for an inkwell, and those were going out of date when I was in school.

There's a dark little courtyard just outside the window with iron gratings everywhere. In the middle sat a cement something where trash was thrown.

Miss Schaal (the head of the English department) saw me looking out the window. "We had lovely curtains to cover the window, but the last teacher in this room took them. She only lasted five months" (Teloar, 1966a, p. 1A).

The reporter continued by explaining the school's textbook policy as it was related to him by Miss Schaal.

"The seventh and eighth graders don't GET textbooks," she said.

"When I get them to you, the books are to be kept in the room. You pass them out when you need them, and you collect them at the end of the hour. If the children took books home, we'd never get them back.

"The ninth graders will get English texts, but they'll have to sign out for them. We try to push homework on the ninth graders, but don't bank on it ever getting done" (Treloar, 1966a, p. 10A).

In a later installment, the reporter elaborated on the negative attitude that permeated the entire teaching staff:

Instead of dealing with the problem of attitudes, a third to a half of Jefferson's teachers have rejected their students as "uneducable."

For the new teachers fresh out of college, there is plenty of encouragement to "give up."

When he doesn't do well on the first few days, there are embittered teachers on every side ready to tell him: "These kids are just plain dumb. You will never teach them anything...."

Friday morning, my last day at Jefferson, I walked up the front steps with one of the new teachers, a young man just graduated from Michigan State University.

I asked him how he felt after his first week in a new profession.

"It's one week toward retirement," he shrugged (Treloar, 1966c, pp. 1A, 8A).

The incident at Northern, followed by this shocking series of newspaper articles, highlighted the poor quality of education that was afforded to minority students in

Detroit. They also highlighted the racial tensions that had long existed within the city, and, in retrospect, perhaps foreshadowed the massive riot that consumed Detroit the next summer.¹

Student Teaching at Windrow

As large sections of Detroit burned in the summer of 1967, the neighborhoods surrounding Windrow remained largely unaffected. There were no lootings, no arrests, and no injuries or deaths. Life immediately after the riot continued much as it had before. During the next several years, however, there was a notable rise in the “white flight” to the suburbs that had begun in the 1950s. In 1946, for example, more than 80% of the students in the city’s schools were white, while by 1967 this percentage had dwindled to 40. Eight years later it was less than 23% (Mirel, 1993). The statistics at Windrow followed this general trend during the 1970s and 1980s, although the school was almost entirely unintegrated before 1970.

The setting in which Anna did her student teaching was the pre-1970 version of Windrow High School. Working with a mentor teacher whom she described as being “traditional” in her pedagogy, Anna taught two tenth-grade English classes and received a very positive evaluation. “Miss Henson is most pleasant and cooperative,” wrote her cooperating teacher on the official evaluation form. “She has a friendly, relaxed but not permissive manner with her students... which create(s) an atmosphere conducive to learning.... I believe she will be a fine teacher.”

After graduating from Michigan State University, Anna interviewed for several teaching positions in Detroit and nearby Lansing—but had difficulty in

¹Early on the morning of July 23, 1967, the Detroit police raided an after-hours drinking establishment located in a low-income African-American neighborhood. A crowd gathered; insults were shouted; and a bottle was hurled through the window of a police cruiser. The situation soon escalated into a full-scale riot that lasted for six days. When it was over, 43 people were dead, with more than 1000 injured, and 7000 arrested. In addition, some 2,500 buildings were looted, burned, or destroyed, with property damage being estimated at \$80-\$125 million (in 1967 dollars). Altogether, it took more than 17,000 men to restore order to the city—including 4000 local and state police officers, 8500 Michigan National Guardsmen, and 4700 regular United States Army troops (Fine, 1989).

finding a job. "This was in the late '60s when the profession was pretty much saturated," she explained. "With the Vietnam War going on, there were a lot more males applying for positions as teachers." Anna was eventually hired as a substitute teacher in Lansing, where she filled in for absent teachers at all grade levels.

Beginning Teacher

While living and working in Lansing, Anna received an unexpected job offer from the Detroit Public Schools—teaching English to seventh-, eighth-, and ninth-graders at Franklin Junior High School (a pseudonym). She jumped at this opportunity and reported to work during the third week of November in 1969. By all accounts, this was a very difficult experience for Anna. The teacher whom she replaced was an alcoholic who had been released for drinking on the job, and the classroom she inherited was in a state of chaos. "I remember asking the principal if he at least had a list of names, so that I'd have a place to begin," she said. "But he said 'no.' He just walked me to the classroom and closed the door. I will never forget that."

For Anna, teaching at Franklin Junior High was not at all like student teaching at Windrow—or subbing in Lansing. Instead, it was much more similar to the experience that Treloar (1966a, 1966b, 1966c, 1966d) had described in his series of articles in the *Detroit Free Press*. Anna explained it as follows:

Franklin was in a state of transition. When I got there, it was no longer a school that had lots of parental support and a strong staff with strong leadership. New teachers were starting to come in, while the experienced ones were leaving. They were simply not ready for the kinds of things that they were beginning to see in the classroom. And, typical of a school in transition, the leadership began to retire, so we just didn't get the right kind of support. There was this sort of flailing around looking for ways to keep going.... By the time I left the school seven years later, 95% of the staff had changed. That's an amazing turnover.

One of Anna's colleagues at this school remembered Anna as a teacher who got off to a very rough start—an assessment with which Anna readily agreed:

I had so much trouble at first. And I was so disappointed. I was young and enthusiastic and couldn't wait to get into the classroom—and then to have all of this resistance addressed at me personally was extremely disappointing.... The kids were vicious—the things they wrote and the things they said. I remember that there was just this overwhelming sense that I wasn't wanted there, and nowhere in my wildest imagination had I ever pictured myself being the object of that kind of hostility.... I mean rowdiness and that kind of thing I was ready for, but I was totally unprepared for these kinds of personal attacks. Sometimes, I'd stay out in the parking lot for a half hour in tears before I could drive home, wondering how in the world I was going to walk back in there the next day with any kind of dignity.

Anna told this story with a faint smile on her face, as if she could hardly believe her own inexperience, and she was very frank in discussing her shortcomings. "Part of the problem," she explained, "was that I kept appealing to the whole class."

I can say now, with some experience, that I wasn't looking at the class as a group of individuals, except for the tormentors, except for the leaders. And at the same time, I was ignoring the other kids who would have been great allies. I just kept appealing to the whole class....

With the help of some of her colleagues, Anna was gradually able to move beyond this rough beginning and establish a niche for herself at Franklin, much as she had done in college. "Things did pick up," she said, "thanks to the support of people who saw that I was in trouble and cared enough about the kids and about me to help." Indeed, Anna's first-year performance evaluation, which was a simple checklist completed by her principal, contained "good" or "superior" ratings in every category.

Anna, however, was not satisfied. In searching for solutions to the problems that she was encountering in her classroom, she enrolled in graduate school at The University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and she began to work on a Master of Arts degree in education. In explaining her thinking at the time, she said:

My expectations of students when I started teaching were very traditional. I thought that I was responsible for bringing the work to them, that they were to take in all the things that I had been prepared to teach. Of course, that fell apart really quickly. Nothing that I learned in my teacher education program prepared me for kids who didn't read, couldn't read, and were struggling with

the simplest tasks in writing—like writing names. I didn't see how anything I was prepared to do fit the requirements of the job. So that lack of fit made me begin to question and draw from other resources for how to do this, how to make this work. My initial conflict was something that drove me back to school.... I thought that there must be some way a master's degree in education would answer some questions for me on things that I wasn't getting help with within the system.

One of Anna's professors remembered her as being a quiet student. "It wasn't that she didn't participate," he explained to me during an interview.

But she had a kind of held back, soft, reserved demeanor that made it necessary for me as a teacher to draw her out. And already, it was my practice in those days to get to know the stories of my students, get a sense of who they were, what their major life concerns were as well as their more academic interests. So, it soon became clear to me that Anna was deeply involved in her teaching of English, that she cared a lot about her students, but she was quite diffident about her ability to reach them.

One problem was that Anna felt trapped by the official English curriculum at Franklin Junior High, which consisted primarily of the *Robert's English* textbook (Roberts, 1968) with a heavy emphasis on transformational grammar. On one hand, she felt obligated to follow this curriculum, while on the other hand, she knew it was not working. "I knew that kids sitting with that old *Roberts English Series* book in seventh and eighth grade and writing out those transformational grammar sentences was not (productive)," she said.

(The book) had nothing to do with the students. It had very little to do with me. The writing that the students were doing was just reproducing what was in the textbooks, completely remote from their lives. They had little interest in writing it, and I had little interest in reading it, so we weren't making any connection at all.

Nevertheless, Anna continued to receive favorable evaluations by her supervisors. A second-year evaluation conducted by her Department Head included the following narrative description of one of her lessons:

Two pictures, each containing many errors and discrepancies, were projected on the overhead projector. Pupils were to list at least five errors for each. Discussion revealed that not all students had the same answers since people

see things differently. The last few minutes of the class were spent with crossword puzzles.

The Department Head also noted that Anna had difficulty in getting the students to cooperate during the discussion, but he praised her efforts nonetheless.

Miss Henson tried hard to get students to participate in an orderly manner in the discussion. Unfortunately, many have not yet learned to raise their hands and be recognized. I find this typical of many of our students and I do not feel that this is because of any negligence on Miss Henson's part.

Each year, Anna's official evaluations became more and more complimentary of her teaching, showing a steady progression in her performance—at least as it was perceived by her supervisors. Her third-year evaluation stated that Anna "began the class promptly after the tardy bell," and instructed her students to silently read the explanatory material while she took attendance. Continuing, it said:

The several students who were tardy were quickly and quietly given their instructions with a minimum of disturbance to the rest of the class. When Miss Henson began to work orally with the class, most students were attentive and seemed to get the point of the lesson.

The evaluation concluded with the observation that Anna's classroom was "neat and attractive."

By now, Anna had begun to move beyond the confines of the official school curriculum, with its emphasis on transformational grammar, and she began to design her own curriculum around the needs and interests of her students. She said:

I began to draw on more community resource type things. I worked with the *Bulletin Spirits* program and brought bulletins to my classroom. We (the students) did writing in the bulletin; we made little books; we did all that stuff that whole language is describing now. We were doing this then. I took lots of pictures of the kids and activities in the classroom and then asked them to think about them and write about that.... It was essentially a combined curriculum—the things the school provided and the things I was trying to provide.

In spite of her apparent successes as a teacher, deep inside, Anna remained dissatisfied with her job and seriously considered pursuing another career. "I

thought I probably wasn't going to be a very effective teacher and that if I wanted to do something useful, then I should think about getting out of the classroom," she said. "But I was mostly burned out. I didn't feel like I had the energy or the resources left. Even though I could figure out ways of making it work, I couldn't see myself doing this for another 20 years."

Anna taught at Franklin Junior High for a few more years before suddenly making a radical career change. Taking a leave of absence from her job, she abruptly moved across the country to Oregon and enrolled in graduate school at Portland State University. "I was getting completely overwhelmed by the kinds of problems that kids were bringing to school," she said. "I simply knew that I needed to get away and needed time to think, and I thought that a different place would help me to make some decisions—away from school, away from family.

Taking a one-year sabbatical from teaching and re-enrolling in graduate school—this time away from the familiar setting of Michigan in which she had spent her entire life—she was able to fully immerse herself in the kinds of scholarly activities that had always appealed to her. She grew a great deal during this time, both personally and professionally. "That was a really valuable year in a lot of ways," she said. "I studied American Literature and did quite a bit of thinking about teaching, and I came back with resolve that that was what I wanted to do." Although Anna had gone to Oregon with no firm commitment to return to Michigan, she soon decided that Portland was not the kind of city where she wanted to live permanently. "Portland seemed to be about twenty years behind the rest of the country," she explained.

It was not a very progressive place politically. The pace was so different (from Detroit), and I wasn't particularly comfortable there.... So I wrote back to Detroit and told the personnel director that if he could find me a high school English position, I'd be happy to come back.

Return to Windrow

Coincidentally, there just happened to be an opening at Windrow High School. The school, however, had undergone many changes. In fact, the entire city had changed. The 1970s was a tumultuous decade for Detroit (Mirel, 1993). Between 1970 and the 1980, it lost more than one-fifth of its population, as white middle class families steadily fled to the surrounding suburbs. Businesses, too, deserted the city at an alarming rate, which further drained the already-diminished tax base upon which the schools depended for their funding. Thus, teachers found themselves in the difficult position of encountering an increasing number of poor and minority students while their resources were simultaneously diminishing. By 1977, when Anna returned to Windrow, almost three-quarters of the students were African-American. Nine years later, it was totally segregated, with virtually no white students remaining.

In spite of the turmoil associated with this transition, Anna began her new job at Windrow with a great deal of enthusiasm. "I thought after seven years of making due at Franklin—just trying to get by—I was finally going to be able to do all those things that they taught me about in college," she said. "I was going to present the curriculum, the college-bound curriculum. Wrong!" Her excitement quickly faded when she discovered that none of her classes were in the college-bound track. "My first semester at Windrow, I had five remedial classes," she said. "They were RC classes, which meant 'Reading Comprehension.' It was a dry compensatory reading program that included lots of pages—lots of standing at the ditto machine, which is something that I absolutely refused to do."

Just as she had done at Franklin, Anna began to look for ways to transcend the prescribed curriculum to which she felt bound, and she turned to writing as a way to engage her students. "We spent more class time writing than we did

reading—and working from their texts,” she explained. She also turned to the students themselves and listened to their concerns.

I started looking at what kids cared about when they came to class, and it usually had nothing to do with how creative my dittos were or what wonderful magazines I was bringing in. It had to do with each other. They cared about who was showing up each day. How that had escaped me all those years, I’ll never know, but the kids were interested in the kids. But it never said that in any textbook. No one had ever told me that this was the kind of thing I should be looking at or working toward—creating some kind of cohesiveness among the group and trying to get the students to create the need to be there for each other.

During one of our tape-recorded interviews, Anna explained how this realization gradually transformed her teaching.

We had a core group of kids—Jason, Robert, Mary, Duane... I’ll never forget those kids. They were so good to each other—so supportive. And I was simply honest with them that I didn’t know exactly what we were going to do—only that we were going to try to work toward making the class enjoyable. I said, “You guys help me figure out how to do that.” And they were so creative and so original and so ambitious for each other in the kinds of things they suggested. They started telling me things like, “We need to talk. We need to have discussions in class about what we care about.”

“Okay,” I said, “you guys set this up. How are you going to do it? Who’s in charge?” And I just sat back and let it happen and watched these kids start creating a class in a way that I had never been able to do. And there was this shift from my taking the whole responsibility for planning, for making it work, for content, for doing the things that I felt the teacher was being paid to do, to this sort of sharing the responsibility for making things work. And, believe it or not, things started to work. We brought their lives into the classroom... and that has been an unforgettable class for me because they taught me my shortcomings as a planner.

Those kids stayed with me a year, and they seemed to almost adopt me as a teacher. They were very sensitive to my need for them to be successful in order for me to be satisfied somehow with the way things were working. And we could have these very candid conversations about why schools didn’t work and why had they not been successful before. These were really bright kids, and here they were in this remedial class prepared to be put down, prepared to put each other down, but they somehow pulled together to show me that they could do things.

They were there every day. Their attendance didn’t look anything like the attendance for my other remedial classes. Their grades didn’t look anything like the grades for the other classes. You know, if a kid’s not coming, there goes the grade! You simply have no other choice because attendance

influences everything. There's also no cohesiveness in the class when the students aren't coming on a regular basis. There's no sense of community. And I have to say that this was the first class that I ever taught where I could characterize the group as having some communal sense, some sense of shared responsibility for one another. And we kept that. I was fortunate enough to have a number of these students back in the eleventh grade—this time in an Honor's class. They had worked their way out of the remedial track.

In telling this story, Anna emphasized that it took many more years for her to gain the ability and confidence to foster this kind of climate in her other classes. The transformation was gradual, she said, with this particular experience simply providing her with a glimpse into what a classroom might become—an ideal for which to strive.

Anna's Classroom Today

Anna's English classes are organized around a system of writing folders where the students keep all of their writing. These folders are stored in cardboard boxes located at the front of the classroom, and the students pick them up each day as they enter. A couple of times a week, Anna looks at them in order to see what the students have been working on, often writing brief responses on Post-It notes. Describing this practice, one student commented, "She always has a note to leave for each one of us. It's always something—always. I mean she leaves little things like, 'Oh, very good, you should finish writing this piece,' or 'You should have made it just a little bit longer,' or 'You should have described more.'"

Rather than having students work on small daily assignments, such as worksheets, comprehension questions, or grammar exercises as she had done in the past, Anna often engages her students in projects that last for several days or even weeks. For instance, one project that occurred early in the year involved a short story entitled "The Stone Boy" by Gina Berriault. It was about a boy who accidentally killed his brother and then had to deal with his family which would not discuss it. To prepare her students for this story, Anna first had them work in small groups to

answer the following question: How do family members react to a death in the family? Then, she asked them to make a list of words that described an appropriate response to death. After finishing the story and seeing the movie version of the story, the students completed a writing assignment in which they discussed the main character, Arnold, from the point of view of a teacher or a psychologist. Anna wanted them to write about Arnold's problem and his prognosis from this perspective.

As the year progresses, Anna's classroom gradually becomes less teacher-directed, and her instructions for assignments become less specific. She explained that she is much more interested in what a student did with an assignment—how they appropriated it to meet their particular needs—than in how well they followed her particular instructions. The kind of work that students undertake in Anna's classroom was usually open to negotiation—on both a class and an individual basis. Although she usually provides some general guidance, Anna allows the students to adapt her assignments to meet their specific interests and needs as readers and writers and as people. "I try to invite the students to set the agenda," she said.

A new group of students will be very suspicious—until they see that I'm serious. When they pose agenda items or assignments, I use their language and type up their responses as a group, and we talk about what the possibilities are, what's realistic for us to try to do together, what's important for us to think about together. So, from the beginning, they have a sense that this is not my classroom, but it's our classroom. Ultimately, all of my planning comes out of the things that the students have written about, talked about, requested, and read.

Throughout the year, Anna regularly conducts conferences with students in order to discuss works in progress. These conferences are sometimes requested by students and other times by Anna. Some of them are one-on-one, while others involve several students at once. Anna said:

Conferencing has been so vital to my coming to know students. I don't think there is any better way than in the kind of conversation we're having to get to know someone. Students relish that time. They

appreciate the opportunity to speak and to be listened to. And typically, the conferences begin with a very general question such as "How are things going?" or "What can I help you with?" And then the student talks and I take notes.

Anna's students agree that these conferences were an important part of their class. When I asked one of them to describe the strengths of the class, she replied, "It is the open discussion. You get to discuss anything openly... also the writing... the reading... and the conferences with our teacher, the way she will walk us through something if we don't understand."

In evaluating her students' work, Anna relies extensively upon the students' own self-assessments. She stated:

Early in my career, it was really easy for me to just add up all the numbers in the book and divide by whatever number there was accumulated there and write the report card and look at the results. That's become much less easy as I have gone through this transformation, where now I'm eagerly awaiting report cards and for the students to tell me precisely how they've done.

The standards for this evaluation are usually collaboratively negotiated in Anna's classroom. As the students proceed through the writing process, they are encouraged to share their works-in-progress with their peers—either in small groups or with the whole class—and it is through the resulting dialogue that the characteristics of good writing are identified. Anna also participates in this process, but she is careful not to dominate the discussion. When students read each other's papers in these informal writing groups, the qualities that they define as the strengths of particular pieces become their measures of success. In this way, the class defines their own standards.

The actual assigning of grades in Anna's classroom usually takes place through student/teacher conferences, which occur after particular pieces of writing are completed. One of her students explained the process as follows:

We read the paper and we'll talk about it. Then, we'll have little groups, and we'll go up to Ms. Henson and talk to her about our grades.

She'll give us her opinion about the paper, and we'll give her our opinion, and we'll talk about it. She'll say, "Well, I come up with the grade such-and-such," and you'll say, "Well, I think I should get such-and-such." You talk about that and you accommodate each other.

In these conferences, Anna typically invites the students to discuss what grade they feel best reflected the work they have done on a specific piece and why, and this grade is then entered in the official grade book—often by the students themselves. "I think grades sort of belong to the students," she said, "and grade books should be there for them to observe. In fact, when they complete assignments they actually check them off in the grade book themselves. It's always there and it's always open."

The timing for the completion of writing tasks is relatively open-ended, with the students setting their own pace for individual pieces of writing in their folders. Anna tries to prevent elements of the school context, such as marking period dates, to constrain the students' decision-making in this area. Deadlines are loosely set, with Anna acknowledging that some students need an announced due date to help them work toward task-completion, but changes in the due date are always negotiable. "I used to be much more traditional in the sense that I expected all papers to be finished at a certain time," she said. "But now, the deadline is when the piece is finished, and that call is made by the student, perhaps in collaboration with other writers and other readers."

Another characteristic of Anna's classroom is a free-flow of talk. Virtually every time I visited, the students were sitting in groups, doing their work, and talking freely. Some were talking about their papers, while others were talking about non-school-related things. Anna never attempts to regulate the kind of talk that her students did. However, she does ask the students to lower their voices when the noise level got too loud, and she often allows students to go to the library when they needed a more quiet place to work. Few of Anna's students had ever been afforded

this kind of freedom in their other classes, yet they clearly recognize its benefit. In explaining how talk influenced his work, one male student told me:

Well, people are going to talk regardless. If you go to a class, and it's like, "No talking, just sit there and do your work," it's not fun. You have to learn in a comfortable environment. I guess that's what she's trying to set. You work at your own pace, and talk to your friends, converse and stuff. But sometimes when you talk to your friends or what-not, that sparks your creative writing....

As the year progresses, all of Anna's classes develop a strong sense of community. The students seem to genuinely care about themselves and each other, and how the entire class is progressing. Conflicts are extremely rare. Some students even intentionally miss other classes so they can remain in Anna's room and continue to work. It is obvious that she cared very deeply about them as students and as people, and they reciprocate. In describing what she liked best about Anna's classroom, one female student stated quite eloquently:

I think that Ms. Henson is about the only teacher that I have had at Windrow, besides Ms. Mosenthal, that ever really cared, who talked to me and asked me how I was doing.... She's concerned, and that makes me more concerned. It's a snowball reaction. Somebody has to care, and I care the utmost. With her caring too, you're working as one, and we get more accomplished that way. If she didn't care, then that would make me have a different feel about the class. It would be a whole other ballgame.

Anna's Beliefs about Literacy

Anna's current beliefs about literacy stem from her personal life experiences, and from her career-long observations of children and how they learn. Early in her career, she was somewhat influenced by the perspectives that were put forth in her college courses and which were also expounded in the research literature of the day. However, many of these beliefs proved to be superficial, and she discarded them rather quickly after trying to put them into practice and not being satisfied with the results. For example, as a beginning teacher, she readily accepted the belief that literacy was synonymous with the mastery of skills. At that time, in late 1960s and

early 1970s, mastery learning and skills-based instruction were the dominant approaches in the teaching of reading in the United States, and she felt obliged to use them in her classroom. Anna said, "There was this notion that if you could master syllables, then you'd understand words... and once you knew words, you'd know sentences... and once you knew sentences, you'd build paragraphs. But real reading doesn't occur that way, and writing doesn't either."

When Anna was a preservice teacher, and throughout much of her later career, the standard view of literacy focused solely on reading, with writing being almost totally ignored. "Writing was something that everyone assumed you could either do or you couldn't do," she explained.

It wasn't a question of learning how to do it better. You either had the talent for it or you didn't. We know so much more now about how students acquire writing and how they build writing skills, but that was something that my methods classes didn't prepare me for at all. We concentrated on reading, exclusively.

When Anna did have her students write in those initial years, her approach tended to be methodical and formulaic. "Early on," she said, "my expectations were very traditional. Everybody needed to know how to write a business letter, how to distinguish a personal letter from a business letter—the textbook approach to genre." The entire emphasis was on the mastery of form; the content and the purpose of the writing were virtually irrelevant.

In contrast, as an experienced teacher, Anna believed in the importance of emphasizing the utilitarian value of literacy. "When students have something to say and a reason to communicate," she said, "they can write very efficiently and effectively." Anna knew from her own life experiences—from her parents and her grandparents—that reading and writing were practical tools for communication, not ends unto themselves. However, she did not initially draw a connection between this knowledge and her classroom practices. Anna explained:

At first, I wasn't paying attention to any of the things that students were trying to communicate. That wasn't even important to the lesson. The worksheets—if you got the “-ing” in the right place, or if you put the “-ed” where it was supposed to go, if you understood the singular or past tense, plurals with no “s,” then you knew how to do things. That's what was important. Forget that you might have a really compelling story to tell. Forget that there was anything important to say.

In the real world of Anna's parents and grandparents, reading and writing were important because they served useful roles in their lives. The letters that her mother read and composed brought the family together and enabled them to imagine the lives of those who remained in the “Old Country.” Although Anna knew the power of stories in her own life, she did not initially value them as a teaching tool—which is not surprising, given the emphasis of her college courses. “All through my college education,” she said, “story-telling and narrative weren't valued very highly.”

We weren't taught any ways of using children's own lives, for example, in an English curriculum. It was always how to present some canonical piece, all the books that had been prescribed over the years that were deemed important. That's what we needed to know. So, when I left college, that's virtually all I knew, except for my own stories.

One of Anna's most fundamental beliefs about literacy—one which greatly influenced what she did in her classroom during my visits—was the idea that reading and writing were an important means for self-discovery. In one of our interviews, she remarked, “I think that deciding who we are and what we think is pretty important.... Kids should be encouraged to grow in their own direction and learn who they are. The time we spend talking, reading, and writing should be guided by that notion.” Anna held this belief throughout much of her life. In 1975, she wrote a paper for a college course that expressed the same sentiment. “In terms of philosophy,” she wrote, “my ultimate concern is knowing oneself. Writing allows an individual a maximum awareness of his own being in relationship to

other individuals and experiences." However, this belief was generally unsupported by her experiences as a preservice teacher.

Closely related to Anna's perception of literacy as a tool for self-reflection was the idea that students should be encouraged to choose their own topics and evaluate their own work. Regarding the issue of topic choice, she explained:

I'm more and more strongly convinced that the students have to generate their own ideas. That business of assigned topics is sort of a power play on the part of teachers to maintain control over the writing process. I think there are ways to explore things that students may know about without my being the presenter of those ideas and those forms.

Anna said that she always felt this way—even as a young teacher. "Early on," she explained, "I probably always felt that students should choose their own topics. I don't remember it being an issue or a problem. Having to think up things to write about is such an integral part of being a writer." Anna has long been guided by the notion that writing in school should be modeled after writing in the "real world," and this idea influenced her feeling about the importance of self-evaluation. She said, "Again, it's modeled on real world writing, where the first person who judges what you are saying is you. You are always the first reader of your writing."

In conclusion, Anna's beliefs about literacy fell into two main categories. On the one hand, there were temporary beliefs that arose primarily through her university experiences as a preservice teacher—while on the other hand, there were long-standing, permanent beliefs that were deeply rooted in her personal life experiences. And, when these two kinds of beliefs clashed, it was the generally latter which prevailed.

The Relationship Between Anna's Beliefs and Practices

As an experienced teacher, Anna's student-centered teaching practices were closely related to her underlying beliefs about literacy. However, the relationship was not always a close one. Early in her career, Anna possessed a variety of beliefs that arose from a combination of her childhood experiences in school and her

university experiences as a preservice teacher. These temporary, school-based beliefs guided many of her early teaching practices. For example, she initially taught reading as a skill with lots of worksheets, and her writing assignments tended to be teacher-directed and formulaic. At the same time, however, Anna possessed a core of more permanent beliefs that were deeply rooted in her childhood and adult experiences outside school. For example, remembering her family experiences with her parents and grandparents, she strongly believed that reading and writing were exciting, dynamic activities that had utilitarian functions—but this belief had little initial impact on her early teaching practices. It was not until she tried to implement teaching practices based upon her school-based beliefs, and was dissatisfied with the results, that she gradually began to explore other ways of teaching.

Over time, Anna either abandoned or reshaped many of her prior beliefs and drew upon other more-stable ones in order to create a functional pedagogy. It was a practical move—one that she made in response to the demands of her job—and the transition was slow, haphazard, and idiosyncratic, with no definite beginning or end. The one thing that remained constant was Anna's desire to be a successful teacher and her commitment to be critically self-reflective about her beliefs and practices.

Learning from Anna's Story

Although an in-depth life history study of the beliefs and practices of a single teacher has little value for making statistical generalizations about other teachers, it can be extremely useful as a vehicle for elaborating an understanding of our own beliefs and practices. Donmoyer (1990) makes a compelling argument for expanding the notion of generalizability to include the learning that people experience when they read about single cases. By telling Anna's story I have provided readers with a tool for reflecting upon their own beliefs and practices. By actively weighing Anna's experiences against their own evolving life stories, readers may gain deeper insights

into the underlying beliefs, assumptions, and experiences that shape their own teaching practices. Engaging in this kind of self-reflection has been shown to be an essential part of teachers' professional growth and development (see, e.g., Cole & Knowles, 2000; Dick, 1993; Ebbs, 1995/1996; Gustafson, 1993/1995; Holt-Reynolds, 1994; Knowles, 1993; Koive-Rybicki, 1995/1996; Smith, 1994; Tann, 1993; Winikates, 1995/1996).

An in-depth study of a single teacher such as Anna can also be used to build theory. For example, some researchers have a tendency to view teachers' beliefs as uni-dimensional and interchangeable entities, which can be influenced through direct or indirect interventions (e.g., Bednar, 1993; Ginns & Watters, 1990; Laurenson, 1995; Lubinski, Otto, Rich, & Jaberg, 1995; Ojanen, 1993; Rueda & Garcia, 1994). The goal of such researchers, it seems, is to *change* the thinking of teachers in some way—a goal which they readily admit is extremely difficult to achieve. From Anna's story, there emerges a theory which may help to explain this difficulty. Perhaps beliefs are not uni-dimensional and interchangeable. Perhaps they exist on varying levels. For example, Anna's beliefs seemed to fall into two broad categories—defined largely on the basis of their usefulness and longevity. On the one hand, there were temporary beliefs that arose primarily through her childhood experiences in school and her university experiences as a preservice teacher. These beliefs proved dysfunctional when she tried to put them into practice, and she therefore abandoned them. On the other hand, there were long-standing beliefs that were, for the most part, deeply rooted in her personal life experiences that transcended school. These beliefs, which had withstood the test of time, were the very essence of who she was as a person, and they were immutable to change. Over time, then, it was her teaching practices that gradually changed, as she made a concerted, career-long effort to develop a pedagogy that was consistent with her most deeply held beliefs.

The relative ineffectiveness of college experiences to influence the long-term thinking of preservice teachers has been well-documented. Zeichner and Tabachnick (1981) have observed that preservice teachers enter college with traditional notions about teaching and learning, temporarily become more progressive or liberal while in college, and then revert to their prior beliefs after they student-teach and enter full-time employment. Similarly, Holt-Reynolds (1992) has shown that preservice teachers often adopt the practices taught in their education methods courses without fully understanding or embracing the theories upon which they are based. They rely heavily upon their pre-existing belief systems, even though these systems may be diametrically opposed to the teaching practices which they are enthusiastically adopting. The story of Anna may help to explain this phenomenon.

If preservice teachers enter college with traditional attitudes toward teaching and learning, which gradually become more progressive while they are in college—but only temporarily—then perhaps it is because their teacher education experiences have not really challenged their existing thinking. My study with Anna suggests that authentic change occurs when one's beliefs have been challenged in some way and found to be lacking. It would seem that the responsibility of teacher educators, therefore, is to figure ways to highlight any acknowledged shortcomings and inconsistencies of preservice teachers' existing beliefs—not so that other beliefs can be forcefully inserted in their place, but rather as a form of self-discovery in which preservice teachers gain insights into their thinking and develop functional pedagogies that are both theoretically-sound and consistent with who they are as people.

In the end, this study illustrates the tremendous complexity and contextualized nature of teacher thinking. In addition, it reinforces the notion that being a teacher involves much more than simply mastering a set of skills. It also

involves the development of an inner awareness—a sense of how one’s life experiences have helped to shape the beliefs and underlying assumptions that ultimately guide one’s practices. Most teachers seek a coherence between their personal theories of teaching and the practical demands of their jobs, but there is no single way to achieve this; there is no universal formula for success. Instead, I maintain that teachers must ultimately develop their own personal pedagogies which are consistent with their inner selves. In this way, teaching may be viewed not as a science, but as an artistic form of self-expression.

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